little-known documents

Playbill for George Lippard's *The Quaker City*

INTRODUCTION BY
SARI ALTSCHULER AND
AARON M. TOBIASON

Introduction

ON 11 NOVEMBER 1844, A MOB GATHERED OUTSIDE PHILADELPHIA'S CHESNUT STREET THEATRE FOR, IN THE WORDS OF THE THEATER'S MANager, Francis Wemyss, the purpose "of a grand row" (395). The crowd intended to prevent the opening of *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, a play George Lippard had adapted from the work he was simultaneously publishing serially; it would become the best-selling novel of the first half of the nineteenth century. Capitalizing on a sensational 1843 murder case that fascinated Philadelphians, the novel retold the story of Singleton Mercer, a Philadelphia clerk acquitted of killing his sister's seducer. Infuriated by the playbill, Mercer attempted to purchase two hundred tickets for his supporters, who threatened to destroy the theater (Durang 247). Wemyss wanted Mercer jailed, but the mayor, wary of "riot and bloodshed," countered, "I really think you have struck the first blow in your playbill" and called for the play's cancellation (qtd. in Wemyss 319–20). As the crowd of irate Philadelphians gathered, Lippard strode through it draped in an "ample cloak and carrying a sword-cane to repel assaults" (Bouton 20). Facing the very real prospect of violence, Wemyss reluctantly canceled the production.

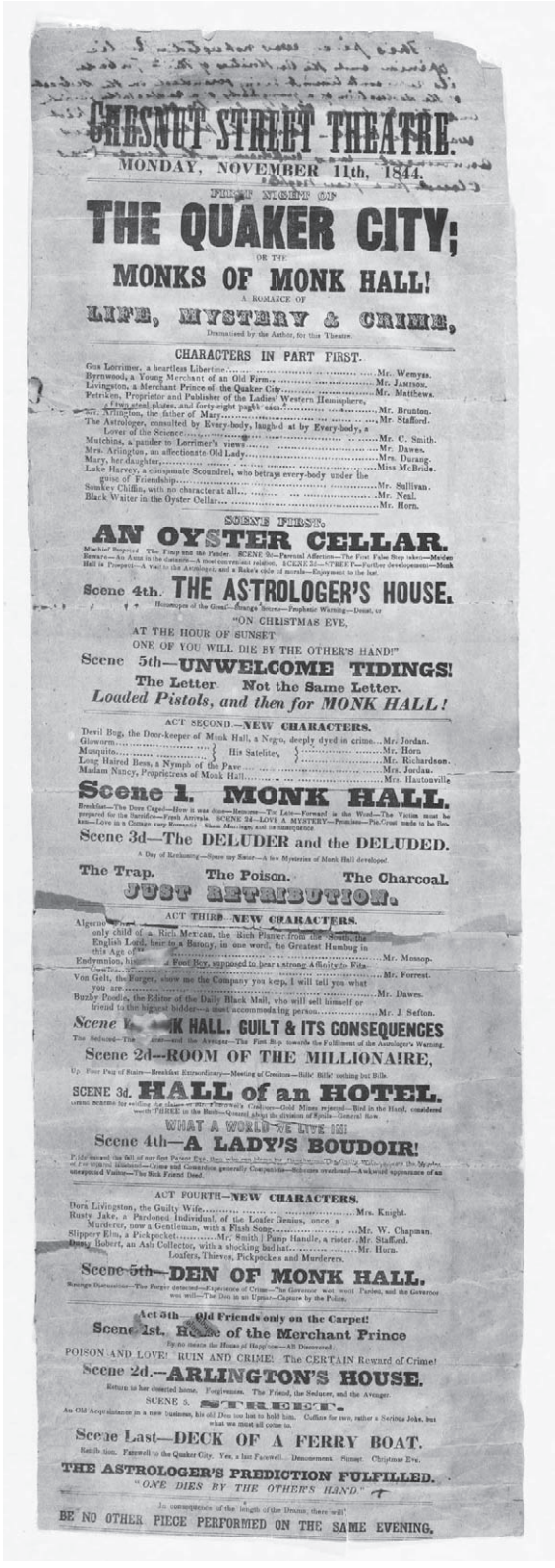
The scene has fascinated literary, theater, and cultural scholars alike, though, until this rare artifact recently resurfaced, evidence related to the play's cancellation has been limited to a handful of contemporaneous accounts. Playbills from this period, printed on thin sheets of rag or paper and designed to be covered over almost daily, were nearly as ephemeral as the performances they heralded. Few are extant. The rediscovered playbill's tattered condition attests such artifacts' fragility, and its archival presence—a rare copy, filed in a different theater's box in the archive—suggests the tenuous existence of those that have survived. That it announces a play that was never performed further distinguishes it, given the generally conservative approach of theater managers, who typically operated on the edge of bankruptcy and could ill afford to advertise performances that might be canceled. The playbill is as valuable as it is rare, offering a window onto the development of the best-selling American novel before 1852 and shedding

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CHESNUT STREET THEATRE.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11th, 1844.

FIRST NIGHT OF

THE QUAKER CITY;

OR THE

MONKS OF MONK HALL!

A ROMANCE OF

LIFE, MYSTERY & CRIME,

Dramatized by the Author, for this Theatre.

CHARACTERS IN PART FIRST.

Gus Lorrimer, a heartless Libertine.....Mr. Wemyss.
Brynwood, a Young Merchant of an Old Firm.....Mr. Jamison.
Livingston, a Merchant Prince of the Quaker City.....Mr. Matthews.
Petrikin, Proprietor and Publisher of the Ladies' Western Hemisphere, (Two steel plates, and forty-eight pages each.)
Mr. Arlington, the father of Mary.....Mr. Brunton.
The Astrologer, consulted by Every-body, laughed at by Every-body, a Lover of the Science.....Mr. Stafford.
Mutchins, a pander to Lorrimer's views.....Mr. C. Smith.
Mrs. Arlington, an affectionate Old Lady.....Mr. Dawes.
Mary, her daughter.....Mrs. Durang.
Luke Harvey, a consumate Scoundrel, who betrays every-body under the guise of Friendship.....Miss McBride.
Sonkey Chiffin, with no character at all.....Mr. Sullivan.
Black Waiter in the Oyster Cellar.....Mr. Neal.
.....Mr. Horn.

SCENE FIRST.

AN OYSTER CELLAR.

Mischief Projected. The Pimp and the Fidler. SCENE 2d.—Parental Affection—The First False Step taken—Maiden Beware—An Aunt in the distance—A most convenient relative. SCENE 3d.—THEFT For—Further developements—Monk Hall in Prospect—A visit to the Astrologer, and a Rake's circle of morals—Enjoyment to the last.

Scene 4th. THE ASTROLOGER'S HOUSE.

Horoscopes of the Good—Strange Stores—Prophetic Warning—Doom, or

"ON CHRISTMAS EVE,
AT THE HOUR OF SUNSET,
ONE OF YOU WILL DIE BY THE OTHER'S HAND!"

Scene 5th—UNWELCOME TIDINGS!

The Letter Not the Same Letter.

Loaded Pistols, and then for MONK HALL!

ACT SECOND—NEW CHARACTERS.

Devil Bogs, the Door-keeper of Monk Hall, a Negro, deeply dyed in crime...Mr. Jordan.
Glowworm.....
Musquito.....} His Satellites, }.....Mr. Horn
Long Haired Bess, a Nymph of the Pave.....Mr. Richardson.
Madam Nancy, Proprietress of Monk Hall.....Mrs. Jordan.
.....Mrs. Hantonville.

Scene 1. MONK HALL.

Breakfast—The Dove Caged—How it was done—Remorse—The Letter—Forward in the Wind—The Victim must be prepared for the Sacrifice—Fresh Arrivals. SCENE 2d—LOVE A MYSTERY—Proselyting—The Cruel made to be Kind—Love in a Climate very Romantic—Mere Mockery—Its consequence

Scene 3d—The DELUDER and the DELUDED.

A Day of Reckoning—Open my Sister—A few Mysteries of Monk Hall developed

The Trap. The Poison. The Charcoal.

JUST RETRIBUTION.

ACT THIRD—NEW CHARACTERS.

Algernon.....
only child of a Rich Mexican, the Rich Planter from the South—the English Lord, heir to a Barony, in one word, the Greatest Humbug in this Age of.....Mr. Mossop.
Endymion, his.....a Foot Boy, supposed to bear a strong Likeness to Fitz.....Mr. Forrest.
Von Gelt, the Forger, show me the Company you keep, I will tell you what you are.....Mr. Dawes.
Buzby Poodle, the Editor of the Daily Black Mail, who will sell himself or friend to the highest bidder—a most accommodating person.....Mr. J. Sefton.

Scene V. MONK HALL. GUILT & ITS CONSEQUENCES

The Seduced—The Seducer—and the Avenger—The First Step towards the Fulfilment of the Astrologer's Warning.

Scene 2d—ROOM OF THE MILLIONAIRE,

Up Four Pair of Stairs—Breakfast Extraordinary—Meeting of Creditors—Bills' Bills' nothing but Bills.

SCENE 3d. HALL of an HOTEL.

Comic Scenes by selling the Goods of Mr. Livingston's Creditors—Gold Mines rejected—Bird in the Hand, considered worth THREE in the Bush—Ground after the division of Rents—General Row.

WHAT A WORLD WE LIVE IN!

Scene 4th—A LADY'S BOUDOIR!

Fitful reward the fall of our first Parent Eve. Hail, wife and Mother by Nature—Dr. Guilty Wife—Mystery the Mystery of Evil original Sin—Crime and Consequence generally Companion—Schemes overthrown—A sudden appearance of an unexpected Visitor—The Sick Friend Dead.

ACT FOURTH—NEW CHARACTERS.

Dora Livingston, the Guilty Wife.....Mrs. Knight.
Rusty Jake, a Pardoned Individual, of the Loafer Genius, once a Murderer, now a Gentleman, with a Flash Song.....Mr. W. Chapman.
Slippery Elm, a Pickpocket.....Mr. Smith, Pump Handle, a rioter. Mr. Stafford.
Dusty Robert, an Ash Collector, with a shocking bad hat.....Mr. Horn.
Loafers, Thieves, Pickpockes and Murderers.

Scene 5th—DEN OF MONK HALL.

Strange Discoveries—The Forger detected—Experience of Crime—The Governor won't Parley, and the Governor won will—The Den in an Uproar—Capture by the Police.

Act 4th Old Friends only on the Carpet!

Scene 1st. House of the Merchant Prince

In no means the House of Happiness—All Discovered.

POISON AND LOVE! RUIN AND CRIME! The CERTAIN Reward of Crime!

Scene 2d.—ARLINGTON'S HOUSE.

Return to her deserted home. Forgiveness. The Friend, the Seducer, and the Avenger.

SCENE 3. [redacted]

An Old Acquaintance in a new business, his old Den too hot to hold him. Coffins for two, rather a Serious Joke, but what we must all come to.

Scene Last—DECK OF A FERRY BOAT.

Recognition. Farewell to the Quaker City. Yes, a last Farewell... Denouement. Sunset. Christmas Eve.

THE ASTROLOGER'S PREDICTION FULFILLED.

"ONE DIES BY THE OTHER'S HAND."

In consequence of the length of the Drama, there will

BE NO OTHER PIECE PERFORMED ON THE SAME EVENING.

"Playbill for *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall! A Romance of Life, Mystery, and Crime*," DAMS 7112, Playbill Collection [3131], folder Pb 1844-13. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See enlarged details on pages 271–73.

light on the relationship between popular authors and the theater.

The confrontation sparked by the playbill vividly illustrates the lively, sometimes volatile nature of mid-nineteenth-century American theater and the potential perils of staging current events. While the theater was still dominated by adapted European plays, audiences and critics called for the cultivation of a "native" drama. Lippard was the most successful novelist to respond to this call before the 1856 copyright law that first guaranteed authors the rights of representation.[1] Americans may have desired native productions, but staging current events had its risks. Shuffling rapidly through little-rehearsed shows that featured frequent actor-spectator interaction, ad-libbed lines, and a raucous, heterogeneous audience, antebellum theater could be a precarious enterprise. Nevertheless, locked in a fierce competition with the other two established Philadelphia theaters, Wemyss sought to expand the Chesnut's audience by appealing to working-class theatergoers. Thus, he invested heavily in Lippard's topical *The Quaker City*, while also reducing ticket prices and admitting African Americans to the gallery (Durham 198). Neither Wemyss nor Lippard anticipated the fierce opposition the collaboration would provoke or its ramifications. Several months later, under the weight of his expenditures on the play's scenery and repeated attacks in the penny paper *Spirit of the Times*, Wemyss's management collapsed. Lippard learned that the stage was not an effective vehicle for his politics—a lesson that changed the course of his novel and expanded the scope of an incensed Lippard's political critiques.

Following the Chesnut Street scene, as the playbill reveals, Lippard altered his plot to shift the focus from individual vice to systemic political corruption. In a sarcastic footnote, Lippard implores his readers not to be "deceived" by a seeming "anti-Philadelphia tirade": "Churches have *never* been burned in Philadelphia. Nor halls fired . . . nor school houses, given up to a mob. . . . The play of an author, who dared speak out for the truth, has never been *ukase*-d in this

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city. Never. *A contemptible coalition of charlatans, have never resorted to threats of assassination in order to put down a work, which held them up to public scorn*. Never, never!" (206). In addition to serving as an outlet for Lippard's frustration over mayoral meddling, this outburst heralds more radical changes to the novel. Whereas in the novel's early installments Lippard had contented himself with stock representations of corruption—venal newsman, reverend rake, profiteering bank director—the post-riot novel engages in large-scale political critique not suggested by the playbill as part of the original plot. This change is further indicated by Lippard's introduction of a German sorcerer who threatens to mesmerize the populace, a popish plot to control the nation, and, perhaps most important, a dystopian, futuristic nightmare of 1950s monarchical Philadelphia, dreamed by the character Devil-Bug (keeper of the den of sin Monk Hall).

This apocalyptic vision—with its shackled denizens, living dead, decimated structures, geysers of corpses, and ominous appearance of the phrase "Wo unto Sodom"—is unforgettable. Its importance is further demonstrated by the redesigned wrappers of the postplay serials, which feature two scenes involving Devil-Bug, one of which depicts his famous dream. With the introduction of Devil-Bug's dream, the novel's layout shifts suddenly from two columns to one, further demonstrating the singular importance of this passage. Yet while the completed novel invites readers to view Devil-Bug's dream as its crucial scene, it appears to have been added in reaction to the play's censoring (372).

Denied access to the theater, Lippard stages his political critique in the novel, and his use of explicitly theatrical language further connects Devil-Bug's dream to the play's cancellation. For example, Lippard ends his double-column section announcing, "The orchestra of hell strikes up its music, and the play goes on" (371). The dream, unlike the exposé that precedes it, portrays in vivid imagery the systemic, rather than individual, nature of Philadelphia's corruption. In the wake of the cancellation, Monk Hall and the Mercer case are no longer the primary focus of Lippard's vision. He explicates the threat to the republic when, on "the anniversary of the death of Freedom," a king is crowned amid streams of white and black slaves and the rubble of Independence Hall (386). The antifreedom aristocracy of this apocalypse echoes the "contemptible coalition of charlatans" who had threatened Lippard's life and silenced his speech.

Notably, Lippard gives his spectacular political critique to the racially ambiguous Devil-Bug, whose "swarthy brow," "wide mouth," "flat nose," and German accent offer contradictory identity characteristics (105). Refusing to name Devil-Bug's origins and describing him as "a mass of hideous and distorted energy," Lippard's novel allows the reader to project a generalized racial anxiety onto Devil-Bug's body (105). The playbill, however, describes Devil-Bug as "a Negro"—a fact likely to startle twenty-first-century readers. If Lippard ever intended, as with the character of Fitz-Cowles, to reveal Devil-Bug's race at the novel's end, he never did. And if the playbill is a rough sketch of Lippard's pre-riot plans, Devil-Bug's character seems to have changed significantly after the theater incident. Through the dream and Devil-Bug's familial tenderness (toward a daughter, added after the theatrical debacle, for whom he cares a great deal), Lippard converts Devil-Bug from the playbill's "Negro, deeply dyed in crime" to a complex character embodying Lippard's political vision. For antebellum readers familiar with the canceled performance, *The Quaker City* offered one of the richest portrayals of black interiority by a white American novelist to date.

The recovered playbill prompts us to ask new questions about the relationship between the play and the novel: How might seeing or knowing about the playbill have changed contemporary readers' experience of the novel? What is the role of the theatrical in Lippard's fiction? What bearing does Lippard's relationship to the theater have on that of other politically engaged American novelists of the time, like Ned Buntline and Harriet Beecher Stowe?[2] The questions raised by this little-known document abound, and its recovery offers a rare opportunity to examine the rich nexus of literature, theater, politics, and public life.

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Notes

We wish to thank James N. Green, Christopher Looby, David S. Reynolds, Michael Winship, and, especially, Daniel K. Richter and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies for their generous assistance with this piece.

1. Before 1856 United States copyright law only protected the rights of authors to replicate physical copies of their works. After a sustained effort by several playwrights and politicians, the law was amended in 1856 to allow playwrights to control performances of their dramas.

2. The anti-British sentiments expressed by Buntline, a prolific novelist, helped fuel tensions between supporters of the American tragedian Edwin Forrest and those of his British rival, William Charles Macready. In 1849 rioters gathered outside the Astor Place Opera House, where Macready was performing, and more than twenty people lost their lives; Buntline's role earned him a year of hard labor. Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which surpassed *The Quaker City*'s popularity, spawned a variety of dramatic adaptations. While some sought to stage Stowe's appeal to the sympathies of quiescent northerners, many more inflated her characters into gross caricatures that often worked against the author's political objectives. Stowe had little control over such adaptations, since copyright law did not secure for novelists the right to control dramatic adaptations of their works until 1870.

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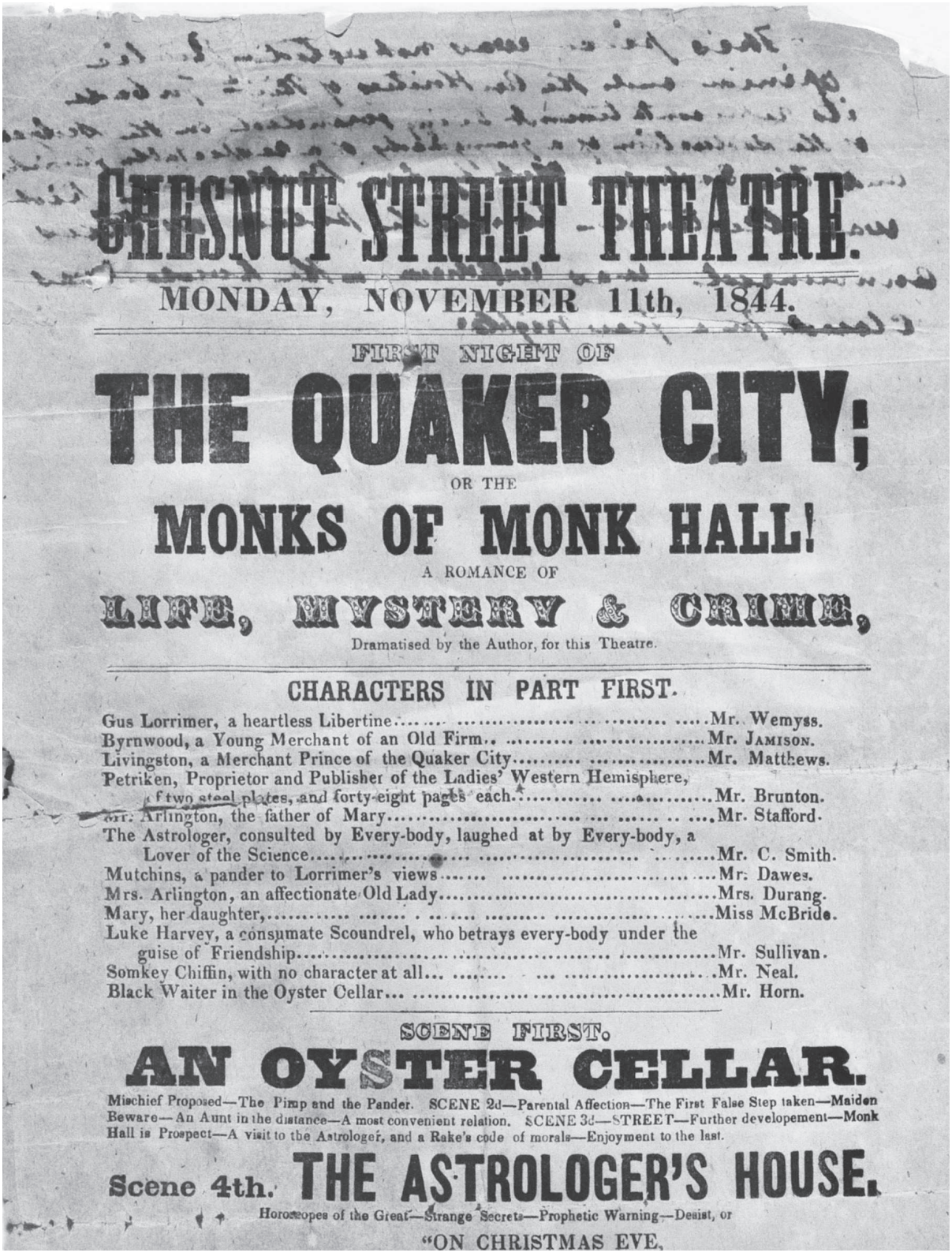
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Petriken, Proprietor and Publisher of the Ladies' Western Hemisphere, of two steel plates, and forty-eight pages each.....Mr. Brunton.
Mr. Arlington, the father of Mary.....Mr. Stafford.
The Astrologer, consulted by Every-body, laughed at by Every-body, a Lover of the Science.....Mr. C. Smith.
Mutchins, a pander to Lorrimer's views.....Mr. Dawes.
Mrs. Arlington, an affectionate Old Lady.....Mrs. Durang.
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Somkey Chiffin, with no character at all.....Mr. Neal.
Black Waiter in the Oyster Cellar.....Mr. Horn.

SCENE FIRST.

AN OYSTER CELLAR.

Mischief Proposed—The Pimp and the Pander. SCENE 2d—Parental Affection—The First False Step taken—Maiden Beware—An Aunt in the distance—A most convenient relation. SCENE 3d—STREET—Further developement—Monk Hall in Prospect—A visit to the Astrologer, and a Rake's code of morals—Enjoyment to the last.

Scene 4th. **THE ASTROLOGER'S HOUSE.**

Horoscopes of the Great—Strange Secrets—Prophetic Warning—Deaist, or

"ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

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Scene 5th—UNWELCOME TIDINGS!

The Letter. Not the Same Letter.

Loaded Pistols, and then for MONK HALL!

ACT SECOND.—NEW CHARACTERS.

Devil Bug, the Door-keeper of Monk Hall, a Negro, deeply dyed in crime...Mr. Jordan.
Gloworm..... } His Satelites, } .....Mr. Horn
Musquito..... } } .....Mr. Richardson.
Long Haired Bess, a Nymph of the Pave.....Mrs. Jordan.
Madam Nancy, Proprietress of Monk Hall.....Mrs. Hautonville

Scene 1. MONK HALL.

Breakfast—The Dove Caged—How it was done—Remorse—Too Late—Forward is the Word—The Victim must be prepared for the Sacrifice—Fresh Arrivals. SCENE 2d—LOVE A MYSTERY—Promises—Pie-Crust made to be Broken—Love in a Cottage very Romantic—Sham Marriage, and its consequence.

Scene 3d—The DELUDER and the DELUDED.

A Day of Reckoning—Spare my Sister—A few Mysteries of Monk Hall developed.

The Trap. The Poison. The Charcoal.

JUST RETRIBUTION.

ACT THIRD---NEW CHARACTERS.

Algerno [illegible]
only child of a Rich Mexican, the Rich Planter from the South, the English Lord, heir to a Barony, in one word, the Greatest Humbug in this Age of [illegible].....Mr. Mossop.
Endymnion, his [illegible] Foot Boy, supposed to bear a strong Affinity to Fitz-Cowles.....Mr. Forrest.
Von Gelt, the Forger, show me the Company you keep, I will tell you what you are.....Mr. Dawes.
Buzby Poodle, the Editor of the Daily Black Mail, who will sell himself or friend to the highest bidder---a most accommodating person.....Mr. J. Sefton.

Scene [illegible]K HALL. GUILT & ITS CONSEQUENCES

The Seduced—The [illegible]ucer—and the Avenger—The First Step towards the Fulfilment of the Astrologer's Warning.

Scene 2d---ROOM OF THE MILLIONAIRE,

Up Four Pair of Stairs—Breakfast Extraordinary—Meeting of Creditors—Bills! Bills! nothing but Bills.

SCENE 3d. HALL of an HOTEL.

Grand Scheme for settling the claims of Mr. Fitzcowel's Creditors—Gold Mines rejected—Bird in the Hand, considered

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SCENE 3d. **HALL of an HOTEL.**

Grand Scheme for settling the claims of Mr. Fitzcowel's Creditors—Gold Mines rejected—Bird in the Hand, considered worth THREE in the Bush—Quarrel about the division of Spoils—General Row.

WHAT A WORLD WE LIVE IN!

Scene 4th—A LADY'S BOUDOIR!

Pride caused the fall of our first Parent Eve, then who can blame her Daughter—The Guilty Wife proposes the Murder of her injured Husband—Crime and Cowardice generally Companions—Schemes overheard—Awkward appearance of an unexpected Visitor—The Sick Friend Dead.

ACT FOURTH—**NEW CHARACTERS.**

Dora Livingston, the Guilty Wife.....Mrs. Knight.
Rusty Jake, a Pardoned Individual, of the Loafer Genius, once a Murderer, now a Gentleman, with a Flash Song.....Mr. W. Chapman.
Slippery Elm, a Pickpocket.....Mr. Smith | Pump Handle, a rioter..Mr. Stafford.
Dusty Bobert, an Ash Collector, with a shocking bad hat.....Mr. Horn.
Loafers, Thieves, Pickpockets and Murderers.

Scene 5th—DEN OF MONK HALL.

Strange Discussions—The Forger detected—Experience of Crime—The Governor wot wont Pardon, and the Governor wot will—The Den in an Uproar—Capture by the Police.

Act 5th—Old Friends only on the Carpet!

Scene 1st. House of the Merchant Prince

By no means the House of Happiness—All Discovered.

POISON AND LOVE! RUIN AND CRIME! The CERTAIN Reward of Crime!

Scene 2d.—ARLINGTON'S HOUSE.

Return to her deserted home. Forgiveness. The Friend, the Seducer, and the Avenger.

SCENE 3. **STREET.**

An Old Acquaintance in a new business, his old Den too hot to hold him. Coffins for two, rather a Serious Joke, but what we must all come to.

Scene Last—DECK OF A FERRY BOAT.

Retribution. Farewell to the Quaker City. Yes, a last Farewell. Denouement. Sunset. Christmas Eve.

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